

**Working with Involuntary Clients:
Practitioners' Perspectives and Strategies**

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This research is a qualitative study of twenty-three practitioners working with involuntary clients in a variety of settings. The purpose of the research was to go beyond the generally acknowledged view that involuntary clients are especially difficult to engage and work with, and discover, through an analysis of practitioners' accounts of their work, what exactly goes wrong in these interactions and how practitioners perceive and deal with the issues presented in this type of work. The effects of the institutional context of social control on practitioners and their work with clients were also addressed.

Drawing on a conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism and conflict sociology, topics were identified which reflected components of practitioner's "theories of action" in their practice. In-depth interviews were conducted with the subjects.

Most practitioners felt that their professional education in practice methods was of limited usefulness in preparing them to deal with the special problems of engaging with involuntary clients. The major differences that emerged, in contrast to voluntary clients, were that involuntary clients are usually unwilling to acknowledge they have a problem or need and do not regard social services as "help", and that the "problem for work" is externally defined by institutions of social control rather than being negotiated by the client and the practitioner.

Results included the following findings. The interpretations made by practitioners of clients' resistant behaviors influenced not only their response to that behavior but their view of the client and their expectations of change as well.

Some described a differential use of confrontation in engagement with clients that focussed more on differences in perception and definition of the situation between the client and institutions of social control, than on internal discrepancies. Where the traditional use of confrontation is intended to lead to insight, the purpose of this "external confrontation" was more directed to negotiating engagement.

Practitioners identified and described a range of "resistance strategies" used by clients. There was a high degree of agreement in describing these client behaviors, and the problems they presented for practitioners.

In analyzing difficulties in interactions discussed by practitioners, it appeared that practitioners and clients were frequently trying to enact different kinds of interactions with different types of relationship and process norms. This led to reports of client behavior that didn't "make sense" within the context of the interaction desired by the practitioner. The variables defined for analysis were rational vs non-rational process norms and assumptions made by actors as to whether the interests they were pursuing were consensual or conflicting with the interests of the other person.

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The Research Problem

Involuntary clients are found in many fields of practice, especially in child welfare and probation where many social workers begin their careers. In spite of the frequency with which practitioners encounter these clients the special problems of practice with this population have received little attention in the practice literature or in social work education.

Practice texts tend to make two major assumptions that cannot be made with the involuntary client: that clients realize they have a problem or need, and are open to the formation of a helping relationship; and that the definition of the "problem" will be negotiated primarily by the client and the practitioner, rather than being externally defined by institutions of social control.

Research Questions and Theoretical Base

This research was an examination of the perceptions of practitioners concerning their interactions with involuntary clients, and their accounts of how they interpreted and responded to clients' behavior toward them. The major focus of attention was on the early stages of practice when the practitioner is attempting to engage with the client and develop a working relationship.

The conceptual framework for the development of the research questions was drawn from symbolic interactionism and conflict sociology. The interactionist perspective provides a framework for the examination of different perspectives and interests and how these differences affect practitioners' and clients' perceptions of themselves, each other, and the practice interaction. Since it stresses the negotiated nature of social reality, it is useful for examining how practitioners and clients try to influence each others perceptions and actions, and the assumptions underlying these "theories of action".

The other component of the conceptual framework is drawn from Randall Collins' Conflict Sociology (1975). This research was concerned with interactions in a conflictual social context. Collins' integration of interactionist and conflict perspectives is used to help explain the effects of power, inequality and conflicting interests on practitioners' perceptions and interactional strategies. Practitioners were asked to discuss two cases in relation to the questions below: one in which they felt they had successfully engaged with the client; one in which they felt they had not. Followup questions and discussion depended on the content of the first part of the interview.

1. What definitions of the situation and the roles of practitioner and client are presented?
2. When there are differences in practitioner and client presentations, how does the practitioner interpret and respond to them?
3. What strategies do practitioners use to influence clients. What strategies do clients use and how do practitioners respond to them?
4. What kind of emotional component is present and how do practitioners interpret and respond to it?
5. What institutional resources do practitioners perceive they have and how do they use them?

Methodology

This was a qualitative study. Interviews were conducted with twenty-three practitioners working in child welfare, mental health and corrections. The employing agencies were contractual vendors. Although about half the subjects were degreed in social work, mostly at the masters' level, educational backgrounds ranged from high school to the doctorate in psychology. Practice experience ranged from 2 to 26 years. Data collection was done with audiotape and field notes.

Results

Interpretations of Resistance: Two general interpretations of clients' resistant behavior emerged. Practitioners tended to interpret resistance either as indicative of personality problems or deficits of clients (symptomatic interpretation) or as a conscious strategy used to avoid engaging with the practitioner, or doing what the practitioner wanted the client to do (strategic interpretation). Few practitioners took extreme positions on this issue, but more than half tended toward the "symptomatic" view of resistance.

Those who made symptomatic interpretations seemed more accepting of clients but less optimistic about the prospects for short-term change in the situation. Those who made strategic interpretations tended to see resistance as normal behavior, and viewed clients as less inherently impaired. However, they were less tolerant of what they regarded as manipulative behavior, and more willing to confront it.

Validation of Clients' Definition of the Situation: Most practitioners in the study acknowledged the importance of responding to clients' emotional reactions to the situation. This is not the same as reflecting awareness of the client's perceptions and interests and acknowledging them as valid. Practitioners often defined clients' perceptions of the situation as wrong, self-serving or irrelevant. If they dealt with them at all, it was usually to attempt to persuade clients that their perceptions were wrong.

Differential Use of Confrontation: A few practitioners described a use of confrontation somewhat different than the way it is dealt with in the practice literature. Rather than focussing on discrepancies internal to the client, such as incongruence, they concentrated on differences between the client's perspective and definition of the situation, and the perspectives and interests of the social institutions which brought practitioner and client into contact. This type of confrontation was typically described as occurring during the first contact. This use of confrontation is suggestive of the early stages of the negotiation model presented by Fisher and Ury in Getting To Yes.

Types of Client Resistance: Practitioners identified five general patterns or strategies they perceived clients as using to avoid engagement, and discussed the issues each strategy presented and how they tried to deal with it. The strategies focussed on one of three perceived client objectives: withdrawal, diversion, or aggression.

Incongruent Interactional Processes: On a deeper level than strategies of resistance, practitioners described situations in which clients behaved in ways that were incongruent with the problem-solving approach practitioners were trying to implement. They frequently defined this behavior as "irrational" and characterized clients as not understanding or accepting professional relationships. This suggested that there might be unrecognized differences in the kinds of interactions practitioners and clients were trying to have.

During data analysis, two interacting variables were defined which led to the definition of four general types of interaction. The variables are rational vs non-rational process norms, and whether each actor perceives his/her interests in the situation as consensual or conflicting with

the interests he/she attributes to the other person. Many of the situations described by practitioners involved two people trying to enact different types of interactions.

Most practitioners tried to use a rational-linear problem-solving process with clients. Norms for this type of interaction are different from those for non-rational processes which are more concerned with emotions, personal agendas and the uses of power. If practitioner and client are trying to interact on the basis of different process norms, much of each person's behavior will not "make sense" to the other.

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Utility For Social Work Practice

The research was focussed on describing and analyzing problems and issues in practice with involuntary clients. However, the following implications for practice are identified:

1. Practitioners need a more complex view of resistance as normal behavior and as a type of motivation.
2. Trying to negotiate "service contracts" in the first interview, a common practice in child welfare protective services, usually doesn't work and often intensifies conflict.
3. External confrontation, with attention to validating clients' perspectives and interests, and the use of a negotiation model such as Fisher & Ury's is suggested.
4. Initial negotiations should deal primarily with developing a consensual definition of the problem and defining roles and relationships, before specific service outcomes are addressed.
5. An ethical framework for practice in social control settings needs to be explicated as a decision-making tool for practitioners in conflictual interactions with clients.